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Participating is more important than winning: The absence of a winner-loser effect in Belgian elections

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Abstract

Elections offer a privileged moment in representative democracy, when citizens have the opportunity to express their views, both on the track record of the incumbent government, as on the way the country should be governed in the future. Procedural fairness theory assumes that taking part in a decision making procedure that is perceived to be fair, strengthens the legitimacy of the entire decision making process. Most of the empirical research assumes that the attitudinal effects of elections are mainly due to the fact that one's preferred party wins the elections. In multi-party systems, however, such a clear distinction is not always possible and therefore it is hypothesized that the winner-loser-logic is weaker in this kind of party system. In this study we rely on a Belgian panel study to ascertain how electoral participation has an effect on political trust. The results show that in a proportional system *all* voters rise in political trust, following their participation in elections. The winner-loser effect is not significant. Furthermore, the analyses suggest that especially the respondents with the initially lowest trust levels gain most by participating in elections. The theoretical implication of this finding is that apparently elections are still considered to be an important and legitimate linkage mechanism between citizens and the political system.

Keywords: Elections, political trust, winner-loser effects, Belgium, political participation

1. Introduction

There is little doubt that free and fair elections are being considered by a vast majority of citizens as the most quintessential characteristic of democracy (Bingham Powell, 2000; Norris, 2014). Despite a trend towards a stronger emphasis on non-institutionalized forms of political participation, citizens still assume that taking part in elections is the single most effective tool they have available to exert their influence on political decision making (Hooghe & Marien, 2014). Both in the literature as in public opinion, there seems to be a consensus that free and fair elections are an absolute minimum requirement in order to qualify as a democracy. If this is correct, one could assume that elections play a crucial role in the current debate on democratic legitimacy (Dahl, 1989; Thomassen, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is striking that research on the question how elections contribute to democratic legitimacy in general is very scattered (Finkel, 1985). Most of the available research focuses on the question how citizens respond when their preferred party or candidate loses the election (Anderson et al., 2005). In this line of research, authors routinely depart from a dichotomous view, whereby parties and voters can be divided in 'winners' and 'losers'. In this winner-loser debate, the focus is not on elections as such, but rather on the effect of winning or losing elections, which is something altogether different. Within the winner-loser debate, the focus is no longer on the effects of procedures, but rather on the effects of the *outcomes* of these procedures. The idea that everyone could have a positive view on the democratic merits of free and fair elections, rather remarkably, is almost completely missing in this literature (Esaiasson, 2011). Nevertheless, a general assumption is that political participation can generate significant changes in attitudes: 'participation is not only instrumental in nature, but also developmental, furthering certain desirable individual qualities and attitudes quite apart from achieving any concrete political objective' (Finkel, 1987, p. 441). This is a peculiar omission in the literature, because in consociational democracies, the goal is exactly to try to avoid that specific groups of the population will be perennial losers in the struggle for power (Lijphart, 2012). Within this literature there is very little attention for the fact that almost by definition supporters for the winning party (and in a proportional system that should be a majority of voters), most likely will develop more trust in the system, as they will be satisfied with the outcome of the elections. By focusing on political trust as a form of diffuse support for the political system and its fundamental values, our claim is that the legitimacy effect of elections should not be limited to supporters of the winning party.

The question on how elections contribute to democratic legitimacy is relevant, first of all because there is a clear concern about low or even eroding levels of democratic legitimacy in the literature. Secondly, however, it is stressed quite frequently that elections have lost most of their effectiveness in connecting citizens to the democratic decision making process. Because of electoral dealignment, fewer citizens express a stable party preference and therefore it is often assumed that they have only a weaker interest in the electoral process itself (Dassonneville, 2012). If that would be the case, the obvious consequence should be that elections do not contribute all that much to democratic legitimacy, and maybe there should be more attention for alternative forms of participation like deliberative or direct democracy. The challenge for the alternative forms of participation however is quite steep, as they have to outperform elections. The current practice of electoral democracy, however, embodies a very basic democratic principle that was already present in the work of Bentham: 'Everybody is to count for one, nobody for more than one'. Earlier research indeed shows that fairness, stability and proportionality are considered by public opinion as important qualities of an electoral system (Curtice & Seyd, 2011). If a rather traditional and tested procedure like free and fair elections would contribute to democratic legitimacy, the challenge for democratic innovation efforts is to contribute at least as strong to democratic legitimacy.

Furthermore, elections stand out as the most visible manifestation of politics within society. One of the merits of elections is that they render visible (and sometimes even attractive) the often abstract struggle on procedures, principles and ideological preferences. Partly because of the contest and the theatrical elements involved with elections, mass media devote a disproportional amount of time to electoral campaigns, Election Day itself, and the reaction of leading politicians. This peak attention could imply that even for groups who usually do not pay any attention at all to politics, it becomes almost impossible to avoid being exposed to political news. In the run up to the 2014 elections in Belgium, the national networks devoted 46 per cent of their total news broadcast time to information about the upcoming elections (De Smedt & Walgrave, 2014). This huge amount of media attention is by itself theoretically relevant. Zaller (1992) assumes that most citizens are not that strongly interested in politics on a day to day basis. Only exceptionally they will be exposed to all the drama that is associated with elections (Chou, Bleiker & Premaratnab, 2016). However, exactly because they do not have a routine involvement in politics, this peak exposure should have the strongest impact (Zaller, 1992). Because of this massive exposure, one could assume that any attitudinal effects elections might have, will not remain limited to a small group of the population.

In this paper, we first review the literature on the winner-loser debate, before developing the argument why elections do not always fit this logic. Subsequently we present data and methods, before we present some conclusions on the attitudinal consequences of elections in a proportional electoral system.

2. Beyond winners and losers

Within the literature on the attitudinal consequences of electoral participation, the guiding assumption is that these effects are ultimately dependent on the results of the elections. To summarize it all too crudely: those who win the elections will be satisfied, and those who lose will be dissatisfied (Clarke & Acock, 1989). Theoretically, two fundamental objections can be made against this assumption. Firstly, it is assumed that elections usually lead to clearly identifiable winners and losers, which is not always the case, especially in proportional electoral systems. Secondly, this line of research remains completely oblivious to the fact that the procedure by itself might have an effect on the perceived trustworthiness of the political system. If voters have sufficient reason to believe in the integrity and the fairness of the electoral system, this should trump their potential disappointment about the results of the elections. Finley (1985, 1987), then, finds that participating in elections increases the support for the regime and the external efficacy of voters – without distinguishing between winners and losers. Before we develop these two arguments further, we first provide a brief overview of the literature on attitudinal effects of electoral participation.

The dominant tradition in this line of research assumes that if elections would produce any changes in the level of political trust, these are mainly due to the results of the elections, with winners becoming more trusting in the system, and losers becoming more distrustful (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001). A recurring expectation in the literature is that only voters who are in favour of the winning party would have a reason to become more trusting, as a direct consequence of the election result (Singh, Lago & Blais, 2011). For Germany, it was shown that the better the party performed, the stronger the positive effect on political trust (Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012). Ugues and Medina Vidal (2015) even go a step further by suggesting that supporting a winning political party determines the perception of fairness of the electoral system. It has to be noted, however, that their study was conducted in Mexico, a political system that obtains relatively low scores on perceptions of political integrity. For the United States Craig et al. (2006) have shown that supporters of the losing party actually lose trust in the political system. Here too, however, the analysis dealt with very exceptional circumstances, i.e.,

the heavily contested 2000 presidential elections, where ultimately the Supreme Court had to decide on the validity of the votes that had been casted. In that specific case, the US voters indeed had very good reasons to doubt the integrity of the electoral process.

Two observations stand out after this review. Firstly, most of the analyses on the winner-loser effect have been conducted in two-party systems, where there usually are clearly identifiable 'winners' and 'losers' (Beaudonnet et al., 2014). If the Democrats gain control of the White House, this automatically implies that the Republicans lose control of the highest office. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this logic can be generalized toward all electoral contexts. In multi-party systems it might be much more cumbersome to determine who is 'winning' and who is 'losing'. It is, e.g., perfectly possible that a party gains votes and seats, but in the end does not enter the governing coalition. Thus far, there is very little research on countries with a proportional electoral system and an accompanying multi-party system. Quite often, this kind of electoral system will also result in government coalitions, which again makes it harder to identify clearly who wins and who loses. To summarize it: these kind of political systems should be seen as 'kinder and gentler' (Lijphart, 2012), and with regard to electoral results this means that often there will not be clear losers. Given the overall context of power sharing, changes most likely will be much more incremental. While the Westminster model departs from a clear antagonism between the main political groups, in a consociational regime, there is no reason to assume that this antagonism would be equally strong. Esaiasson (2011) argues that supporters of a losing party will only lose trust in the political system if the electoral defeat could lead to negative consequences for their legitimate interests. In a consociational system, most likely this will not be the case, as even losing parties remain structurally involved in power-sharing schemes.

A second observation is that in this literature, there is hardly any attention for the effect of the electoral procedure as such: 'While there have been numerous empirical studies of the causal determinants of voting behavior and other acts of political participation, political scientists have virtually ignored the consequences of such activity for the individual' (Finkel, 1985, p. 891). Procedural fairness theory, however, would allow us to predict that taking part in a fair procedure consolidates trust, no matter what the outcomes of the procedure will be (Tyler, 2011). In this case, it is clear that the status of elections is almost sacrosanct. Opinion research shows time and again that free and fair elections are being considered as the most important defining element of what a democracy is all about (Hooghe & Oser, 2016). Furthermore, if the electoral process is seen as fair and neutral, this leads to a higher propensity to voter turnout (Birch, 2010). When this electoral integrity is in doubt, this usually leads to

massive protest in public opinion (Norris, 2011). The way in which the US Supreme Court handled the contested presidential elections in Florida in the year 2000, e.g., clearly had a negative effect on trust in the basic institutions of the US political system (Nicholson & Howard, 2003). If we take along these insights about the importance of the electoral procedure itself, it is clear that the attitudinal consequences of electoral participation should not be just dependent on the results, but should also be directly affected by the procedure as such. Within the European Union, these effects should be positive, as there are no fundamental complaints about a lack of electoral integrity (Norris, Martínez & Grömping, 2015).

An important methodological consideration in this regard is that quite often there is a tautological relation in these studies. Most of the studies use satisfaction with the current administration, or satisfaction with the way democracy works as their main dependent variable. Singh et al. (2012), e.g., use a 0 to 10-scale to probe how satisfied respondents are with the way democracy works. While this measurement of support for the political regime has also frequently been used in other studies (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Esaiasson, 2011; Curini, Jou, & Memoli, 2012), it has also been said to be 'obviously an imperfect measure of support for the political regime' (Blais & Gélineau, 2007, p. 428). Almost by definition this kind of variable is heavily influenced by whom the current office-holders are. If I am a Conservative, and the elections are being won by a Labour candidate, there is not all that much reason for me to be satisfied with the current Labour cabinet. Democratic legitimacy, however, is not related to satisfaction with the current office-holders. Diffuse support refers to the basic principles and institutions of a political system, and it should not be dependent on preferences for the current office holders (Easton, 1965). What is much more important in this regard is a normative consensus about the basic principles of the democratic system and its governing rules (Marien, 2011; Van Elsas, 2015). Previous research has shown that questions about 'satisfaction with democracy in your country' fail to capture this more fundamental consensus, while questions on political trust are much more likely to measure these values. Therefore, it is important that in this line of research, one does not just focus on satisfaction with current office-holders, but one should also pay attention to the basic value of political trust in the system.

3. Data and methods

In an effort to expand research beyond the traditional majoritarian electoral systems, we will make use of electoral survey data from Belgium. The country has a very proportional system, and in fact the most widely used method for proportional seat allocation, the method D'Hondt, was first developed in Belgium, and it has been applied in the country ever since 1899. Belgium is a typical example of a consociational democracy, with elaborated power sharing mechanisms and a tradition of elite compromise (Lijphart, 2012). It is a founding member of the European Union, with an average score on indicators like political trust. Within the European Union, it also receives an average score with regard to electoral integrity (Norris, Martínez & Grömpung, 2015, p. 9). There is no reason to assume, therefore, that Belgium would offer a very special case. The proportionality of the Belgian electoral system renders it likely that this will be perceived as a fair procedure (Bingham Powell, 2000). The proportional procedure reflects the basic moral role that was already expressed in the work of Bentham, that every person is to count for one, and nobody for more than one (Blau, 2004).

To examine whether the proposed hypotheses hold, this study uses the Belgian Election Panel (2009-2014) study (Dassonneville, Falk Pedersen, Grieb, & Hooghe, 2014). This four-wave panel study consists of a representative sample of the Belgian electorate. Starting in the weeks before the elections of 7 June 2009, a sample of 4,863 Belgian voters was drawn from the Belgian National Register, 2,331 of which were interviewed face-to-face. Subsequently, 1,698 of these respondents were interviewed again in the weeks after Election Day. This panel design allows us to measure the evolution in political trust on an individual level between before and after the elections. Moreover, the panel study was continued in 2014. In the weeks leading to the elections of 25 May 2014, the same sample of respondents was contacted to continue the panel study. 1,542 of the contacted respondents completed the (mail) survey. Finally, 707 respondents took part in the post-electoral survey wave. We will concentrate mostly on the 2009 waves, because of the large number of respondents, but in an additional robustness test we will also ascertain whether we obtain the same results when analysing the two waves that were conducted at the occasion of the 2014 elections. The risk of a panel design, however, is panel attrition, rendering the sample less representative. The attrition rate for this specific panel is in line with that of other panel studies that cover an extensive period of time (Dassonneville et al., 2014). Moreover, As Dabros et al. (2015) note, the more highly educated and knowledgeable respondents are more likely to continue participating in the study, and it are also these

respondents that are expected to be most stable in their attitudes. Therefore, the current data should provide a conservative test of changes in political trust. It has to be noted that the 2009 elections were regional elections, but given the strong federal nature of the Belgian political system, and the involvement of the leading politicians as candidates, these can be considered first-order elections (Deschouwer, 2012). In 2014, Belgium held elections for the federal, regional and European level, all on the same day.

3.1. Dependent variable

In order to measure diffuse support for the political system, we will rely on a scale measuring trust in the major political institutions. Following the Eastonian framework, it can be assumed that this kind of scale is closer to the theoretical notion of diffuse support for the political system than questions on satisfaction with the way democracy works, that are more prone to be unduly influenced by opinions on the current incumbent. Dabros et al. (2015, p. 1002), e.g., rely on the survey question: 'How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government in Washington, DC, to do what is right?' The direct reference to Washington DC renders it almost inevitable that responds will be primed to think about the current federal government and therefore it should come as no surprise that this question has been shown to be highly influenced by the winner-loser effect. The political trust scale, on the other hand, refers to the basic principles and institutions of the political system, and therefore one could expect it to be much more robust against the winner-loser effect.

Therefore, we constructed a scale consisting of the answers on five questions. Respondents were asked to indicate how much trust they have on a scale ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust) towards the five institutions which were probed in each wave of the study: political parties, the regional parliament, the federal government, the federal parliament, and politicians. These different measures are expected to measure one latent attitude of political trust. This assumption is tested by including these five items in a principal component analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Political trust scale

How much do you trust…		**Wave 1** (pre-electoral 2009)	**Wave 2** (post-electoral 2009)	**Wave 3** (pre-electoral 2014)	**Wave 4** (post-electoral 2014)
Factor loading	Political parties	0.848	0.835	0.896	0.879
	Regional Parliament	0.778	0.803	0.852	0.839
	Federal government	0.827	0.848	0.918	0.853
	Federal Parliament	0.848	0.879	0.923	0.870
	Politicians	0.821	0.839	0.865	0.878
Eigenvalue		3.400	3.549	3.971	3.730
Cronbach's α		0.882	0.896	0.935	0.914

Entries are the result of a principal component analysis. BEP 2009-2014, n= 1622 in 2009 and n= 624 in 2014. Results were equivalent in the French (n=729/257) and Dutch (n=893/367) language subsamples.

As can be observed in Table 1, the different items load on one same latent concept. The eigenvalue and the Cronbach's alpha indicate a reliable scale. The results of the principal component analysis demonstrate that the political trust scale is one-dimensional and internally coherent, as is also the case in previous European research (Marien, 2011). As such it can be considered as a reliable measurement. We then construct a sum scale adding the scores on the different variables and dividing them by the number of items. Since we are interested in the effect of electoral participation on political trust, the dependent variable is the increase or decrease in this sum scale of trust of the respondent after the elections. Therefore, we follow the method used by Blais and Gélineau (2007) and Esaiasson (2011) and we construct a difference score of the reported trust after (wave 2) and before the elections (wave 1) for each respondent.[1] Since in this way every individual is included once in the data and so observations are independent, we will use Ordinary Least Squares regression to estimate our effects. Table 2 provides an overview of the evolution in trust.

Table 2. Evolution in trust levels

	2009 Mean	Std. Dev.	2014 Mean	Std. Dev.
Trust wave before	4.99	1.517	4.57	1.864
Trust wave after	5.80	1.485	5.71	1.604
Difference before-after	+0.81	1.476	+1.14	1.582

Entries are mean score on trust for respondents taking part in the first and second waves of the BEP 2009-2014 Study (n=1622 in 2009 and 624 in 2014).

[1]. The analyses were also conducted using the trust reported after the elections (wave 2) as dependent variable, controlling for pre-electoral levels of trust (wave 1). The results remain the same as participation has a positive significant effect and none of the operationalisations of winners and losers has a significant effect.

3.2. Independent variables

Research towards winners and losers in elections has taken different approaches of how to operationalise whether a party wins or loses an election. One approach is to consider parties who entered a coalition and thus are part of the new government as winning parties, since governing is considered to be one of the prior objectives of political parties (Anderson et al., 2005; Curini et al., 2012). Singh et al. (2012, p. 206), investigating different forms of 'winning', claim: 'winning basically means being in government'. In a two-party system it is usually quite easy to identify winners and losers in an election cycle. In a multi-party system as Belgium, this is not necessarily the case. The process of forming a governing coalition in Belgium is usually quite cumbersome, and the 2009 and 2014 elections were no exception to this. In the Dutch language region, coalitions were formed 36 days after the election in 2009, and 61 days in 2014. In the French language region, this was resp. 38 days and 58 days. This means that during most of the post-electoral fieldwork, respondents did not know yet what the composition of the governing coalition would be, so this could not have had an effect on their levels of political trust. Entering a governing coalition, therefore, in this study cannot be used as an indicator for winning an election.

To identify whether the winner-loser effect exists in multi-party systems, we will test different operationalisations, thereby taking on the challenge of Anderson et al. (2005, p. 34) to 'disentangle the meaning and import of other definitions' of winners and losers. On the one hand, we will use trichotomies of whether parties lost (-1) or gained (+1) seats or not (0), and whether they lost or gained percentages of the vote. On the other hand, winning or losing was also operationalized as a continuous variable, using the shift in percentage of the vote as a variable. Since what matters for elections is the actual share of seats in Parliament, we also used still a different operationalisation, focusing on the seat shift, i.e. the number of seats won or lost. For the Dutch language community, there is one specific problem: the Nationalists and the Christian-Democrats in 2004 entered the election in a pre-electoral cartel. This means that we do not have a sound comparison basis for the 2009 results. To solve this problem, the members of this parliamentary group in 2008 were divided according to their party affiliation, and this was taken as the initial point of comparison.[2]

Next to this winner or loser status, our main variable of interest is whether the respondent turned out and casted a valid vote. Since our hypothesis states that the mere fact that

[2]. In an additional test, we excluded Flemish Nationalist and Christian Democratic voters, and in that scenario, the winner-loser effect still remains non-significant.

one participated in elections – irrespective of whether their preferred party won or lost – raises the level of political trust, we expect respondents who turned out to have a significantly larger increase in trust than respondents who did not in a valid manner. Some research suggests that especially those who did not vote will lose trust in the political system (Rich, 2015). Therefore, we created the dichotomous variable 'participation', with a score of 0 if the respondent indicates not to have turned out (2.90% of the respondents) and a score of 1 if the respondent indicates to have voted for one of the running parties. It has to be noted that turning out in Belgium is compulsory with as a result a turnout rate of well above 90 per cent. Therefore, we consider casting a blanc vote (1.36% of the respondents) as well as an invalid vote (0.68%) as a sign not wanting to participate but just to turn out to vote as a result of the legal obligation. Consequently, casting a blanc vote or an invalid vote too are coded as 0, making 'participation' a comparison between those voters who did not turn out or did so but casted a blanc or invalid vote, and voters who turned out and voted for a party.[3] Since non-voters are underrepresented in the data, the analyses are weighted to reported turnout.

3.3. Control variables

Self-evidently, we also include various control variables. In line with previous research, the classic control variables that are included are gender (0= male; 1= female), age and educational level. The latter is included as a categorical variable in which the reference category consists of respondents who did not have any education or only a primary education. The first category in the analysis consists of respondents having completed secondary education, and the second of respondents having obtained a tertiary degree.

It has to be remembered that Belgium basically has two distinct party systems as totally different parties compete in the Dutch as in the French speaking of the country. Furthermore, we know that political trust levels are lower in the French region than in the Dutch region (Hooghe & Dassonneville, forthcoming). The language group of the respondent will therefore serve as a control variable (0= French; 1= Dutch).

It also has to be remembered that Belgium is one of the few countries in the world that practices compulsory voting (Deschouwer, 2012). The result of this legal system is that turnout

[3]. We also conducted the analyses with the dichotomy between turning out or not, thus with respondents who casted a blanc or invalid vote also scoring 1 on participation. While winner-loser status still does not render significant results in the full models, the effect of participation loses its significance. It has to be noted, however, that the group of respondents not turning out is very small (n=47; 2.90%), and consequently there is not much variance in this variable.

rates in the country remain rather stable at ca. 90 per cent of the eligible population. This does imply that a substantial part of the Belgian electorate most likely only turns out to vote because of the legal obligation. Therefore, it is standard practice to use a question on the likelihood whether voters would still turn out to vote if compulsory voting would be abolished in the country. Previous analyses have shown that this hypothetical question leads to results that are very similar to the stratification that results from an actual abolishment of compulsory voting, like the Netherlands has done in 1970 (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998). The variable is coded as a dummy with respondents indicating that they would never or sometimes turn out if it weren't compulsory anymore with code 0, and respondents indicating that they would turn out most of the times or always coded as 1.[4]

Research has indicated that voters of different levels of political sophistication experience the electoral race in different ways (Zaller, 1992). Therefore we also control for the respondent's level of political knowledge by constructing a sum scale of the score on five factual questions. Furthermore, we control for the extent to which the respondent was exposed to the electoral campaign. Therefore, respondents were asked how intensively they followed the campaign on a scale ranging from not at all over not so intensive and intensive to very intensive.

4. Results

As a first exploratory test, we plot the evolution in trust before and after the elections for the winners and losers of the elections respectively in Figure 1. For this figure, we distinguished between winners and losers as whether the party the respondent voted for gained (winner) or lost (loser) seats in the respective elections. As can be seen in Figure 1, regardless of whether one voted for a winning or losing party, we can observe a similarly rising level of political trust.

[4]. As a test, the analysis was also conducted with only the respondents indicating they would 'always' continue to turn out as code 1. The results are substantially the same in that the variable voluntary turnout has a significant positive effect on the evolution of political trust.

Figure 1. Evolution of political trust before and after elections, for winners and losers, 2009 and 2014

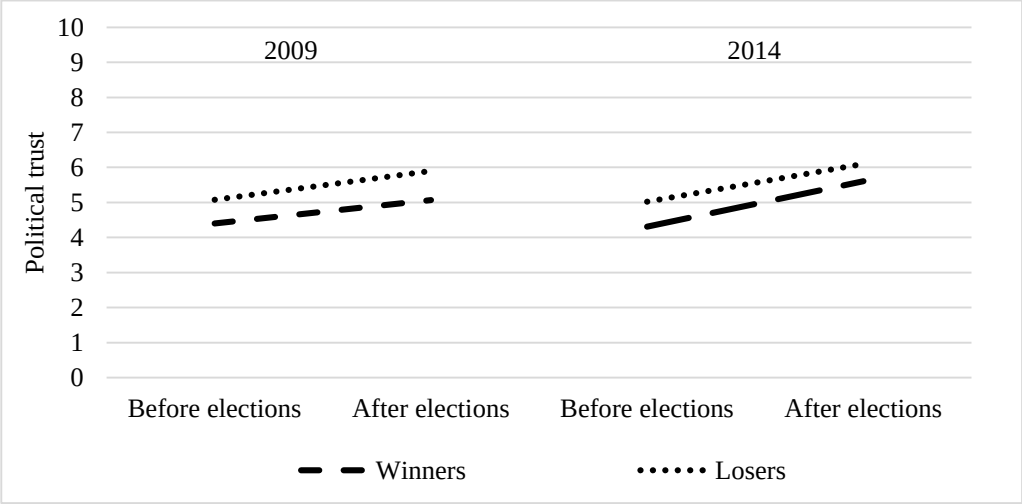


Figure depicts average political trust levels, before and after elections. 'Winner' = voted for a party that gained seats in that specific elections; 'Loser' = voted for a party that lost seats in that specific elections. Both in 2009 and 2014, and both for 'winners' and 'losers', the difference between the average score before the elections, and the average score after the elections is significant at the .001 level.

Second, we present a bivariate overview of results. As can be observed in Table 3, there are marked differences between the electorates of the various parties. The highest levels of political trust can be observed among the voters for the traditionally largest parties, i.e., the Christian Democrats in the Dutch region, and the Socialist Party in the French region of the country. What is more important given the scope of the current article, however, is that among the electorates of all parties we do find a significant rise between the political trust levels observed before the elections, and the ones observed after the elections. Only for the rather limited group of respondents that did not take part in the elections, or did cast a blank/invalid vote, we do not observe a significant difference. This provides some first support to our claim that participating in elections in a valid way raises the voter's level of political trust.

Table 3. Evolution in political trust for voters of the different parties (2009)

		N	Before elections	After elections	Difference
Dutch	Christian-Democrats	253	5.39	6.37	+0.98***
	Greens	49	5.25	5.90	+0.65*
	Nationalists	150	5.00	5.73	+0.73***
	Socialists	135	5.29	5.98	+0.69***
	Extreme Right	67	4.11	4.90	+0.79**
	Liberals	109	5.43	6.03	+0.60**
	Libertarian Party	50	4.35	5.58	+1.23***
French	Socialists	200	5.23	6.26	+1.02***
	Liberals	147	4.71	5.65	+0.94***
	Christian-Democrats	106	5.21	5.94	+0.73***
	Greens	177	4.75	5.52	+0.77***
	Other	39	4.92	5.42	+0.49
	Abstention	47	4.71	5.22	+0.52
	Invalid/blanc	33	3.64	3.86	+0.21
	Refuses answer	60	4.29	4.96	+0.68
	All respondents	1622	4.99	5.80	+0.81***

Source: BEP 2009-2014. Entries are mean scores on political trust for respondents taking part in the first and second wave of the BEP 2009-2014 Study.
Note: *: p<0.05; **: p<0.01; ***: p<0.001

We now turn to an estimation of the effects of participation and of being a winner or loser in the evolution in political trust. The results are summarized in Table 4.[5] The data are weighted according to age and gender. Since we are measuring participation, the data are also weighted to electoral results. In Model 1, following Singh et al. (2012), we control for floor and ceiling effects by including pre-election trust. In Model 2, we include our main variable of interest: whether the respondent turned out to cast a (valid) vote. As can be seen in Table 4, having participated in the elections significantly increases the difference in trust before and after the elections, also when controlling for the level of trust before Election Day. Including this variable also adds to the explained variance. In Model 3, the winner-loser variable is included to investigate whether the evolution in trust differs between winners and losers. In Model 3 of Table 4 we therefore include one of the possible operationalisations of winners and losers; the number of seats the party the respondent voted for lost or gained. As displayed by the not significant coefficient in Model 3, gaining or losing seats has no impact on the evolution of trust, and it then also does not contribute to the explained variance. Also controlling for this winner-loser distinction, participation, however, still significantly increases political trust. In Model 4, we include our control variables to test whether the effect of participation still holds

[5]. The models are tested on problems of multicollinearity. No violations occurred; the highest VIF amounts 1.63, the average VIF amounts 1.22.

when controlling for other possible determinants of a change in trust. Looking at the control variables, the results indicate that for voters who would still continue to turn out, even if it was not compulsory anymore, political trust increases significantly more than for those voters who would not turn out anymore. Also campaign exposure significantly increases the evolution in trust.

Most interestingly, however, is the still significant positive result of participation; also controlling for other variables expected to influence the evolution in political trust, this effect indicates that participation in elections significantly increases political trust. Moreover, the winner-loser variable remains out of reach of any level of significance. This provides strong evidence for our hypothesis that in a multi-party system winning and losing is ambiguous and the mere participation in elections increases the political trust of the voters.

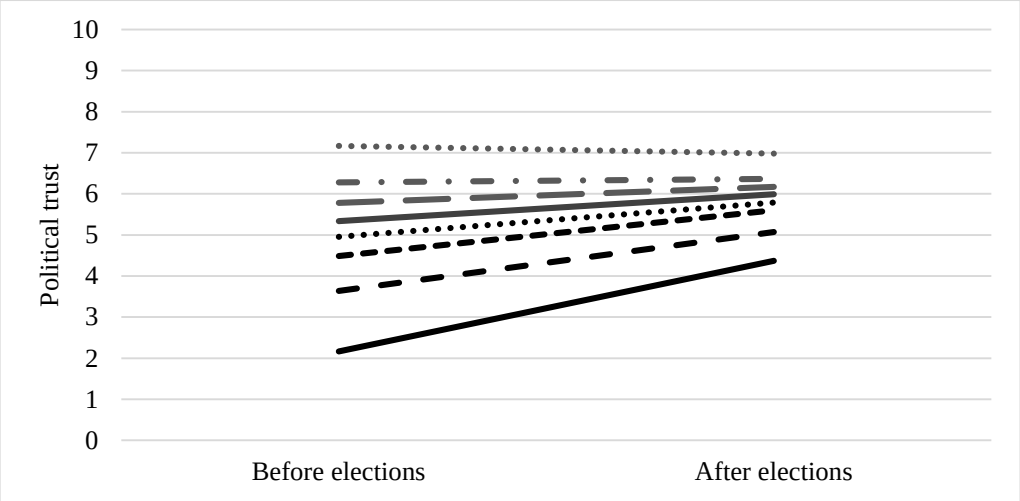
Table 4. Multivariate regression explaining evolution in political trust

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Pre-election trust level	-0.482***	-0.513***	-0.515***	-0.552***
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.037)
Participation		0.799***	0.806***	0.675**
		(0.224)	(0.223)	(0.231)
Winner-Loser (difference in seats)			0.007	0.004
			(0.007)	(0.007)
Gender (1=female)				0.124
				(0.090)
Age				0.003
				(0.002)
Non/primary education (ref.)				
Secondary education				0.042
				(0.112)
Tertiary education				-0.002
				(0.114)
Region (1= Dutch region)				-0.036
				(0.090)
Would vote without obligation				0.297**
				(0.106)
Political knowledge				-0.019
				(0.030)
Campaign exposure				0.160*
				(0.160)
Constant	3.177***	2.605***	2.610***	2.421***
	(0.190)	(0.289)	(0.288)	(0.337)
R^2	0.267	0.298	0.299	0.317
N	1483	1440	1440	1435

Source: BEP 2009-2014. Entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors between brackets. Note: *: p≤0.05; **: p≤0.01; ***: p≤0.001

An intriguing finding in the analysis reported in Table 4 is that there is a strong negative effect of the initial level of political trust. To express it differently: the lower the initial score on the political trust scale, the more respondents have gained in the second observation. This kind of effect immediately suggests a ceiling effect, but a closer inspection of the figures reveals this is not the case: only 17 respondents (1.05%) obtained a trust-score equal to or higher than 8. For this very limited group, indeed, no further growth is possible. For all the other respondents, on the other hand, a growth in political trust levels is possible, but the ones with the initially lowest levels still seem to benefit most strongly from the electoral experience.

Figure 2. Evolution in political trust for initial trust levels (2009)



Source: BEP 2009-2014. Entries are mean scores on political trust of eight equal groups of respondents.

As stated, different operationalisations of winning and losing are possible, and the analyses in Table 4 used just one of the possible operationalisations: how many seats the party the voter voted for gained or lost. To test whether our results hold when alternative definitions are used, the analysis was also conducted with different alternative operationalisations. The two left columns of Table 5 include the coefficients of participation and winner or loser for the respective Model 3 and Model 4 from Table 4. The same variables as in the models of Table 4 were included, but in order to save space only the coefficients of interest are reported here.

Table 5. Impact of participation with different operationalisations of winner-loser

		2009		2014	
		Model 3	Model 4	Model 3	Model 4
Percentage continuous	Participation	0.804***	0.674**	1.183***	0.837**
		(0.224)	(0.231)	(0.353)	(0.300)
	Winner-loser	0.010	0.008	0.005	-0.001
		(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
	R^2	0.299	0.318	0.368	0.469
	N	1440	1435	347	342
Seat trichotomy	Participation	0.831***	0.734**	1.201***	0.836**
		(0.245)	(0.253)	(0.350)	(0.296)
	Winner-loser	0.023	0.044	0.018	-0.007
		(0.071)	(0.072)	(0.075)	(0.073)
	R^2	0.298	0.317	0.365	0.469
	N	1440	1435	348	343
Percentage trichotomy	Participation	0.779**	0.677**	1.200***	0.832**
		(0.251)	(0.257)	(0.350)	(0.297)
	Winner-loser	-0.013	0.004	-0.006	-0.033
		(0.077)	(0.075)	(0.074)	(0.071)
	R^2	0.298	0.317	0.365	0.469
	N	1440	1435	348	343

Source: BEP 2009-2014. Entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors between brackets. Note: *: $p \leq 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p \leq 0.001$

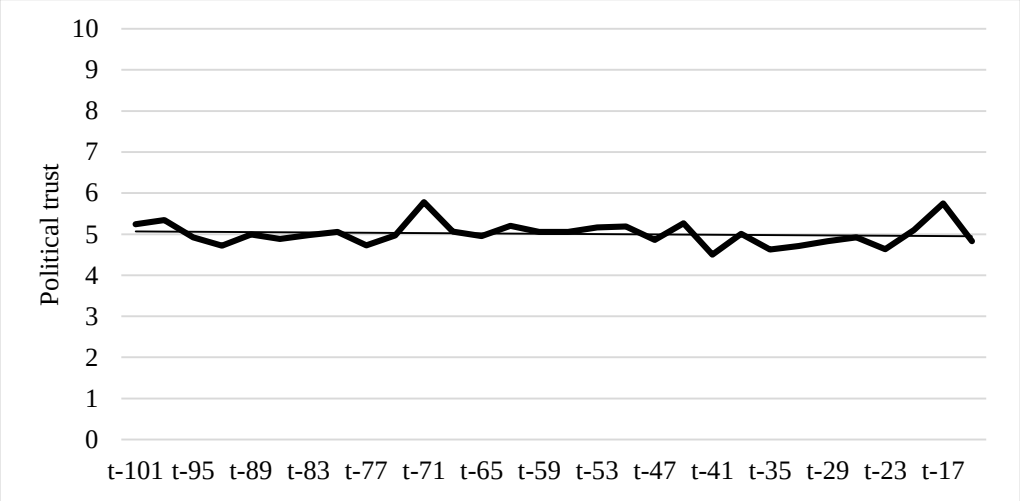
First, we used the percentage of votes the party gained or lost relative to the previous elections. Since this can be any percentage between -100 and 100, we included it as a continuous variable. As can be seen in Table 5, also with this alternative operationalisation, being a winner or a loser does not significantly influence the evolution in trust. Moreover, participation does have a significant positive impact on political trust in both models. The next two alternative operationalisations consist of a trichotomy, indicating whether a party lost (-1), gained (+1) or neither (0) seats or votes respectively. As the results indicate, these alternative definitions all support our hypothesis that not winner-loser-status but participation in the elections significantly boosts political trust. Apparently, and no matter how 'winner-loser' is operationalised, in a proportional system like Belgium, the winner-loser status does not seem to have an effect.

5. Robustness tests

An alternative explanation could be that we are measuring a rather different dynamic within the electoral cycle. During the electoral campaign, candidates and parties tend to spread negative information about their opponents, and one might consider this to erode trust in the political

system. The apparent surge we observe immediately following the elections, therefore, might just be that levels of trust return to a normal level, after being eroded during the electoral campaign. We cannot directly test this assumption, as this would require a series of observations of the same individuals during the electoral campaign, and these repeated observations by themselves might have an effect on attitudes. However, the fact that the fieldwork for the elections extended over a longer period of time allows us to set a kind of rolling average during the electoral campaign. Figure 3 plots the average reported trust throughout the campaign grouped per three days. As can be seen in Figure 3, there is no indication at all that average levels of political trust would decline during the electoral campaign. As such, we do not find any indications for the claim that the campaign activity by itself would have a negative effect on levels of political trust.

Figure 3. Evolution of political trust throughout the electoral campaign



Average score on political trust, respondents grouped per three days during the electoral campaign.

It could also be argued that the 2009 elections would be highly exceptional, as there were no extreme vote shifts between parties. However, the volatility indices for these elections were not exceptional compared to other Belgian elections. Furthermore, as stated we use a panel study spanning two electoral cycles: 2009 and 2014. The results so far are calculated only for the elections of 2009. Since the findings might be caused by effects related to these specific elections, a comparison with the same analyses for the 2014 election provides a robustness check for the results reported above. Therefore, the same analyses are conducted for the pre- and post-electoral waves of the panel study in 2014. Table 6 provides an overview of the effects of the variables of interest similar to Table 4. Just as for the analyses on the data for 2009, we present the different models with the operationalisation of winners and losers as the number of

seats the party the respondent voted for gained or lost. Also in line with the analyses of 2009, we present the results of the analyses with alternative operationalisations of winners and losers separately. These results are included in the two right columns of Table 5, and as can be seen observations are very similar to those for 2009.

Table 6. Multivariate regression explaining evolution in political trust

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Pre-election trust	-0.145***	-0.430***	-0.429***	-0.508***
	(0.079)	(0.063)	(0.034)	(0.049)
Participation		1.200***	1.180***	0.831**
		(0.350)	(0.353)	(0.299)
Winner-Loser (difference in seats)			0.004	-0.000
			(0.006)	(0.006)
Gender (1=female)				0.230
				(0.138)
Age				0.007
				(0.005)
Non/primary education (ref.)				
Secondary education				0.467
				(0.240)
Tertiary education				0.501
				(0.234)
Would vote without obligation				0.093
				(0.209)
Political knowledge				0.087
				(0.065)
Campaign exposure				0.396***
				(0.091)
Constant	3.005***	2.032***	2.026***	1.127
	(0.438)	(0.531)	(0.533)	(0.622)
R^2	0.287	0.365	0.368	0.469
N	349	348	347	342

Source: BEP 2009-2014. Entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors between brackets. Note: *: p≤0.05; **: p≤0.01; ***: p≤0.001

As can be observed in Tables 5 and 6, the results from the 2009-election are confirmed in the context of the elections of 2014. Also in 2014, regardless the way winners and losers are defined, having voted for a winning or losing party does not significantly influence the evolution in political trust. Indicating to continue to turn it if it would not be compulsory anymore does not significantly influence the evolution in trust. Having participated in the elections and casted a vote for one of the running parties, however, has a significant positive impact on political trust. We can therefore be confident that the 2009 results are not caused by events that are specific to those elections.

6. Discussion

Our initial hypothesis was confirmed: taking part in elections is associated with a significant rise in political trust. The prevailing idea in procedural fairness theory receives support: just taking part in a procedure that is perceived to be fair and equal boosts trust in the system. Elections are the prime example of this democratic ethos, as they comply with the notion that everyone is to count for one, and nobody is to count for more than one. Despite a tendency toward dealignment, volatility and lower levels of legitimacy, apparently elections still play this role. It should be acknowledged, however, that most likely this effect is short-lived. In a larger comparative review of the European Social Survey at least, we do not find any relation between the frequency of elections and the level of political trust. So although we observe in the current study that electoral participation boosts political trust, this should not lead to the conclusion that simply multiplying the number of elections would add to this effect.

Despite the fact that we tried to operationalize the concept of winners and losers in a number of ways, we did not find significant differences between supporters of different parties. Theoretically this is an interesting finding, because in the literature this distinction is so central. The fact that it does not have an effect in the Belgian context might hint at the fact that it is very appropriate in a two-party system, but not in a multi-party system. In a two-party system, electoral results almost by definition are a zero-sum game: what party A gains, party B must lose (if we disregard minor third parties). In a multi-party system, there are no clear winners and losers. A party might gain seats, but lose power because another party won even stronger. A winning party might not always enter the governing coalition. The apparent result of this dynamic is that in Belgium at least we do not find a strong winner-loser difference. Theoretically, therefore, it is important to extend these kind of studies to proportional systems with a multi-party system, so that results on e.g., the United States are not generalized without a sufficient backing. The entire literature is focused too heavily on the distinction between winners and losers. But one of the main qualities of the consociational and proportional model is that the system tries to avoid creating real losers (Lijphart, 2012). All major groups do remain involved in some way or another, and can express satisfaction with electoral results.

It has to be acknowledged that in this study on Belgium we could not include the impact of entering the governing coalition, as (most of the) fieldwork for the post-electoral wave was conducted before the new government took office. This is a sharp contrast to the situation in the United States or the United Kingdom, where usually it is already clear the morning after Election Day who will be the next President or resident of Downing Street 10. It has to be

remembered, however, that Belgium in this regard is by no means exceptional. In Western Europe, cabinet formation after elections on average takes something like 40 days, and Belgium is, in fact, quite average in this regard (Ecker & Meyer, 2015). So in quite a number of democracies, voters are confronted with the situation that even after weeks after the elections, they still do not know what will be the next governing coalition. As such, there is no reason to assume that the Belgian situation would be highly exceptional. Furthermore, we know from previous research that when the governing coalition is finally formed, and this might be weeks or months after the elections, this does not seem to have any specific effect on levels of political trust for the supporters of that party (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2016).

Our findings might also be theoretically relevant for a broader debate within political science. In some of the current literature it has become a habit to downplay the democratic potential of elections, in favour of other forms of political participation, and Tormey (2015) has even claimed it is time to move beyond the age of electoral representative democracy. Esaiasson and Narud (2014) too have argued that it has become more important what citizens do between elections, than what they express on election day itself. While self-evidently there are valid arguments in this literature, one should not forget that apparently elections do remain intrinsically related to the basic function of what democracy is all about. For a large group of citizens, especially those with an initially distrustful attitude toward the political system, elections are the most obvious example of how citizens can actually determine the decisions of the political system. As such it is the prime example of a democratic linkage mechanism between citizens and the state. This feeling maybe was expressed most clearly in the famous quote of the French president in his last New Year's eve speech (1995), when he labelled elections as: 'un rendez-vous important que la France se donne à elle-même'. Apparently free and fair elections do enjoy a high moral status, and the current analysis suggests that they boost political trust. It could be expected that this effect will be short-lived and does not survive the entire electoral cycle, but the fact that at least once in every electoral cycle the feeling of political trust is reinforced, is a major accomplishment. What is equally important: it is well-known that for most forms we do observe a strong pattern of social stratification, where the most privileged groups tend to participate most intensively. For elections with a very high turnout rate, like in Belgium, this is clearly not the case. If more intensive forms of political participation can be described as weapon of the happy few (Verba, 2003), elections by definition are the weapon of the many. The current analysis even suggests a reverse stratification, where the respondents with the lowest initial trust levels profit most strongly from electoral participation. From a concern about democratic legitimacy, this is self-evidently the

most problematic group, and therefore it is quite promising that this group benefits most strongly from the electoral effect.

A limitation of the current analysis is that it does not yet inform us about the causal mechanism that could be responsible for the observed compensation effect. Firstly, it should be remembered that electoral campaigns are a period where the mass media report in a very intensive manner on politics. This media frenzy could explain why, even for people who are not interested in politics at all, in this period it might be difficult to avoid any exposure to political news. Secondly, it has to be remembered that Belgium is a stable democracy, where the current system of proportional representation is used since the end of the 19th century. This centennial tradition provides strong legitimacy to the electoral procedure as such. Future research should determine whether we find similar effects in more recent democracies, or in countries where the electoral system has been recently changed. Third, a counter-argument might be that the winner-loser effect is ultimately dependent on the question whether one's preferred party enters the governing coalition or not, so therefore it should be important to conduct panel studies over a longer period of time. Fourth, in the current analysis we relied on political trust as a dependent variable. It might indeed be the case that some operationalisation of 'satisfaction with democracy' would be more prone to be influenced by the winner-loser effect, so a further comparison between these two variables is called for. Fifth, if we want to test the claim that proportional representation leads to a weakening of the winner-loser effect, it would be important to replicate the current study in countries with different scores on the proportionality index.

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